

Commonality in the CH-46E Community
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Introduction

In the Marine Corps, the aviation combat element (ACE) of a Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) is designed and built around a single CH-46E squadron¹. These Sea Knight helicopters and the Marines that maintain and fly them are said to be the backbone of the ACE. When one joins the CH-46E community as a young first lieutenant, he is fed this rhetoric from the moment he steps into the building of Marine Medium Helicopter Training Squadron (HMMT) 164 at Marine Corps Air Station, Camp Pendleton. Furthermore, as a brand new second lieutenant entering flight school at Naval Air Station, Pensacola, he is taught that all Marine Corps pilots are Naval aviators operating from ships. The U.S. government spends millions of dollars and our young pilots spend countless hours studying and flying to learn the science and art of naval aviation. Imagine the waste of taxpayer dollars and student's time and the heart-break of young Marine Corps pilots when they check into one of the three CH-46E squadrons and learn that they will never deploy on or from a ship because they just landed a seat in an Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) deploying squadron.

The United States Marine Corps needs to establish commonality in the CH-46E community's deployment cycles because the current practice causes disparity among Marine Corps CH-46E

pilots in professional development, career enhancement, and troop welfare.

Current Deployment Cycles

Currently, of the twelve active duty CH-46E squadrons in the United States Marine Corps, three squadrons continually deploy to Iraq in support of OIF. These three squadrons are located on the west coast, two at Camp Pendleton and one at Miramar, California. This has been the case since February 2004, when the Marine Corps deployed its first of the three CH-46E squadrons to support sustainment operations in Iraq². These three squadrons deploy for seven months, return to the United States and leave again for Iraq eleven months later.

Unlike the other CH-46E squadrons, that spend approximately six months working up for a MEU deployment and another six months deployed on a US Navy ship, these three squadrons leave behind their aircraft and get on a commercial airliner to relocate to Iraq. Once in-country, the squadron begins to transfer aircraft and spaces from the out-going squadron and eventually takes over the mission. Once the in-coming squadron has taken over the mission, the out-going squadron re-deploys back to the United States and the cycle starts all over again.

This continuous deployment cycle has been in effect for over three and a half years. While this may seem like a very short period of time in the life of the Marine Corps, the

constant Iraqi deployments have created very bad side effects. Pilots who are assigned to these three squadrons will serve three to four years before they transfer to another assignment³. This means that right now, the Marine Corps is moving pilots into other billets, due to time on-station requirements being met, before they even get an opportunity to become well-rounded, professional naval aviators who can operate in any clime and place. These pilots have never deployed from, nevertheless flown off of, a ship or been part of a MEU; the current practice fails to provide professional development as MEU planners and as pilots to these officers.

Disparities

Professional Development

These pilots will also encounter problems in their future assignments, not only in non-flying billets, but also when they go back to a squadron as a major for their second tour in a deploying squadron. As a pilot who only has deployed to Iraq and who has never been on a ship or been part of a MEU, he is severely limited in his scope of CH-46E operations. As a pilot who has only been part of an OIF deploying squadron, he will not have experience in ship board operations, large planning cells, and exercises focused around the ground combat element (GCE), nor had the opportunity to develop important inter-service

relationships with the United States Navy⁴. These naval aviators have only Iraqi theater combat experience and will not be looked at as well-rounded officers or pilots because they will not possess the abilities or qualities of an officer that has been part of a MEU.

Career Enhancement

Marine Corps officers stationed with the three OIF deploying squadrons also have less worldly experiences than pilots in the other CH-46E squadrons. An officer in an OIF squadron will see two countries during his time, Iraq and the United States. Touching down in Germany for two hours while the airplane gets fuel does not count in most Marines' minds. He will also experience a 'ground hog day' mind-set (when every day is the same as the last which results in loss of focus and attention to detail) soon after the beginning of his first deployment which only worsens during his following two deployments. The 'ground hog day' mentality is not only difficult to deal with, but also dangerous for any pilot and aircrew: it diverts your full attention and focus necessary for the flight and mission at hand. This has caused an overwhelming number of OIF deploying pilots to become un-happy in their current squadrons, and many are considering exiting the Marine Corps.

Troop Welfare

The remaining nine active duty CH-46E squadrons deploy in support of the MEU. These squadrons' deployment cycles mirror that of the OIF deploying squadrons in regard to time, with one major difference. A MEU deploying ACE cannot just leave the aircraft behind in hangers and jump on the ship to set sail. These Marines must "work-up" the ability to fly their aircraft in a ship-board environment. Work-up cycles are driven by the Navy and usually a squadron will attach to the MEU six months prior to deploying. This difference alone contributes to more professional experience, career enhancing assignments, and higher morale as seen in a MEU deploying squadron versus a OIF deploying squadron.

CH-46E pilots that have deployed with a MEU generally have more pilot designations and qualifications because the ACE must support complex missions while attached to a MEU. Young pilots just checking into their new squadrons will quickly begin boat qualification, which allows them to operate on and off a ship. This is a qualification that only five percent of pilots have that are in OIF deploying squadrons. Shortly after checking into the squadron, a young pilot in MEU squadron begins training to become an aircraft commander. This designation is usually based on reaching a certain number of hours in the aircraft and

also showing the ability to lead and control a helicopter in all flying environments. When he has six months of work-ups and a six-month deployment immediately following, he has ample time to train and accumulate these designations and many other qualifications. As a pilot in an OIF deploying squadron, he has eleven months at home, which equates to about nine months of training, due to holidays and leave⁵. These nine months of flight time, which are substantially less than flight time of MEU squadrons, are completely taken up by training the brand new pilots entering the squadron. The flight time for a CONUS based squadron is always less than that of a deployed squadron because of funding for flight hours. A squadron attaches to the MEU six months prior to deploying. These six months represent more deployed flight hours, which means much more flight time and training for pilots. Due to the lack of flight hours and time to train, OIF deploying pilots get less training experience and fly fewer hours while they are not deployed. This situation is further degraded when the OIF squadron gets into country and is told that it cannot do any squadron training. While deployed on a MEU, the squadron pilots continually train and progress through the CH-46E training syllabus, further advancing their professional flying abilities and gaining important career enhancing experiences.

A proposal to fix this problem is really quite simple: involve the rest of the CH-46E community in the rigors of combat deployments to Iraq. In fact, the Marine Corps would have to only involve the remaining three squadrons stationed on the west coast. If the Marine Corps can rotate three squadrons in and out of Iraq, it can do it with six. Instead of deploying to Iraq every eleven months, crews would deploy there every 29 months. Each west coast CH-46E squadron would deploy to Iraq for seven months, come home for eleven months, and then deploy on a MEU for six months, and return for twelve months. The deployments, experience, training and at-home time would be shared by all west coast CH-46E squadrons.

Counterargument

One could argue that Marines joined their service in order to serve their country in the world's finest fighting force and to see the world. This quest is provided when one deploys as part of a MEU. A MEU pilot will experience port calls in many different countries, fly in numerous country's airspace, and meet and learn from many different cultures and foreign services while deployed. This is a vastly different experience from an OIF deploying pilot who will never intermingle with local culture, who will fly in only one country's airspace, and who will visit no other countries while on a deployment. This

experience greatly reduces a Marines morale level, especially when he joined to participate in these activities and learns that he will only deploy to the same place and do the same thing every day and night.

Fortunately, OIF deploying pilots accumulate large amounts of "red ink" time. A typical deployment to Iraq could net in as high as 400 combat flight hours. Unfortunately, this does not make an OIF deploying aircrew different from most MEU pilots. Since the beginning of OIF in March of 2003, most MEUs have made their way to Iraq in order to support operations. This just adds to the list of capabilities and experiences that a MEU pilot has and an OIF deploying pilot does not.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a CH-46E squadron is best utilized when it is configured as an ACE and deployed in support of a MEU. The training and readiness manual, tactics manuals, and current techniques and procedures are all integrated and maximized when the Sea Knight helicopter is deployed in this fashion. The Marine Corps needs to realize the impact the current deployment pattern has had on the CH-46E community. The Marine Corps now has two different types of CH-46E pilots, ones that have had professional, career enhancing MEU deployments in which those pilots have also experienced combat operations in Iraq and the

other Marine aviators who have experienced only an OIF deployment to a combat zone. These Marine officers are peers in rank, but soon the division among them will become apparent when these captains become majors and those with only OIF experience will be past over for billet opportunities to be department heads and eventually squadron commanding officers.

¹ U.S. Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-2. Aviation operations. 9 May 2000.

² 3d Marine Aircraft Wing Command Chronologies. 1 January 2004 - 31 December 2006.

³ United States Marine Corps, Manpower and Reserve Affairs. URL: <https://www.manpower.usmc.mil/portal/page?_pageid=278,1&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL

⁴ U.S. Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-0. Marine Corps Operations. 27 September 2001.

⁵ 3d Marine Aircraft Wing Command Chronologies. 1 January 2004 - 31 December 2006.

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